

[Speth: A cleaner Earth starts with cleaner elections](#)

By Gus Speth/ Guest columnist

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Forty years ago today, I joined with fellow environmentalists and millions of concerned citizens in thousands of schools and communities across the country to mark the first Earth Day. It was a moment of urgency and hope for our planet.

Since that historic day, the American people have taken small but measurable steps in our daily lives on behalf of the environment. We avoid aerosol sprays and wasteful packaging. We go out of our way to recycle our trash. We shop for energy-efficient appliances and we look for ways to better insulate our homes. And, we're slowly moving toward adoption of high-mileage, fuel-efficient vehicles.

But to this day, we have been unable to address the most vexing, long-term environmental challenge of all: a rapidly changing climate caused, in large part, by our dependence on fossil fuels. We now know this isn't just an environmental priority; it is an economic priority and a national defense priority. It's an issue that by any standard should be of the highest importance to Congress and our president.

Decades after the problem of global warming was first identified, why are we still unable to act? The answer involves more than policy alone: it begins with the way we conduct our politics in Washington, DC. Let's take a look at some numbers.

The energy industry, including oil and gas, electric utilities, mining, and waste management, contributed an astonishing \$455 million to candidates for the House and Senate between 1990 and 2006. Members of the Senate and House received an average of \$161,423 and \$43,658 respectively in just the first seven months of 2008. To put this in perspective, the energy industry contributed 20 times more than environmental groups between 1990 and 2008.

Is it any surprise that Congress has been unable to shape a sound national energy policy based on scientific evidence and the needs of all our people, not just the monied interests?

I don't believe we can overcome this paralysis until we eliminate the corrupting influence of special interest money on our political agenda. And the best way I know to accomplish

this task is to enact voluntary public funding of all federal elections, so that We, the People own our elected representatives.

Public funding has proven itself in cities such as New York and in states such as Maine, Connecticut, New Jersey, and my home state of Arizona. It allows credible candidates to run competitive races. And, because those who win elections using public funds have no special interest obligations to repay, they represent their conscience and constituents alone. What's more, they won't have to spend a third of their time raising money for their next election.

Even in the aftermath of an unfortunate Supreme Court ruling which permitted unlimited corporate spending in campaigns, the public funding principal stands: if a candidate receives adequate public funding to promote his or her message, excessive spending by opponents, parties, or special interest groups have proven to have little role in determining the outcome of an election. Above a certain level, additional spending by opponents or their backers has no measurable return.

Legislation has now been introduced in Congress proposing public funding. It is called the Fair Elections Now Act and provides sufficient public matching funds to candidates who demonstrate broad-based public support by raising small contributions. In return for public funds, candidates would agree to raise money from their constituents in amounts of \$100 or less and forego all larger contributions.

To date, more than 150 Members of the U.S. House and Senate have signed on as sponsors of the bill. That is a considerable achievement, considering how well incumbents have shown themselves to function within the current system. But it is not enough to pass the bill and give our country the means to address the most pressing environmental challenge of our day.

If we can give Congress a viable alternative to our current system of reliance on special interests, I believe a comprehensive and rational national energy policy will become the priority it should be. Then we'll really have reason to celebrate Earth Day.

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